

Anti-corruption accountability measures may actually erode citizens' trust in political institutions, though they don't have to

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*British politics was rocked in 2009 by the Parliamentary expenses scandal, which revealed the full extent of MPs claims, and provoked a near unprecedented media storm and damaged Parliament's reputation significantly. **Nan Zhang** shares research from China, which shows that though anti-corruption measures can have both a positive and a negative impact on public perceptions of the the system's integrity.*



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It has almost become common wisdom in the good governance community that with greater accountability comes greater trust in government. The logic underlying this relationship is simple: accountability ensures that wrongdoers get their “just deserts,” while also deterring future abuses of office, thereby raising the general level of institutional integrity. And aren’t cleaner institutions the foundation for a more engaged relationship between the state and its citizens?

And yet, if we examine public reaction to the now-infamous British [parliamentary expenses scandal](#), it appears that such intuitions are off the mark. On the one hand, the revelations in May 2009 of MPs’ fraudulent expenses claims generated exactly the type of institutional response we would hope for under conditions of accountable government. Politicians implicated in the scandal resigned, or were forced to stand down in the next year’s elections; their actions were ruthless scrutinised in the press and through official investigations; they were disowned by their colleagues, and five MPs and two Peers have even been jailed. These developments set in motion a chain of events which culminated in a new system of accountability-in-action that many poorly-governed societies could only dream of achieving.

However, the British public was seemingly not reassured by the robust institutional response to these events. In fact, a [2010 survey](#) found that a plurality of respondents believed the scandal showed that the political class as a whole could not be trusted. In some [media pieces](#) as well, the scandal has been seen as contributing to ever-waning confidence in the integrity of political institutions. In summary, it appears that a substantial number British citizens perceived the 2009 revelations as indicative of more systematic moral lapses in government, rather than as evidence that the state could be trusted to police the bad apples within its ranks.

Public reaction in this case illustrates the dilemma facing reformers calling for greater transparency and accountability in government. Indeed, accountability is often seen as vital to controlling corruption and the abuse of office. But while, in theory, the exposure and punishment of wrongdoers can demonstrate that the public institutions fundamentally committed to rooting out graft, such events can also create the impression that illicit practices are commonplace, even normal, in politics. And this perception is dangerous because it erodes the social and moral taboos that normally constrain such conduct in the first place. After all, if everyone is dipping into the public till, why should I not help myself as well? Thus, the vital question is: **when corruption is exposed, what inferences about public institutions are citizens likely to draw?**

In a [recent paper](#), I examined this question in the context of an anti-corruption campaign in China implicating ex-Shanghai mayor (and politburo member) Chen Liangyu. More specifically, in September 2006, the government announced Chen's dismissal and arrest for accepting over \$340,000 USD in bribes in connection with a [social security funds scandal](#). Although Chen's downfall represents a fascinating case study in its own right, this episode was especially interesting because it coincided with fieldwork on a nationally-representative survey measuring, amongst other items, trust in government with respect to corruption. The unexpected announcement of Chen's arrest thus presents us with a "natural experiment:" by comparing responses collected in the days before and after the scandal, we can precisely estimate how anti-corruption enforcement changed public opinion about the integrity of public institutions in this case.

How did the Chinese public react to Chen's downfall? Much to my surprise, I found that the scandal actually *increased* citizens' trust in state institutions. In other words, rather than perceiving information about Chen's transgressions as indicative of greater "rot within the system," Chinese citizens became *more* convinced that the state could be trusted to tackle malfeasance within its own ranks.

Why did the Chinese and British publics draw such different conclusions from these two scandals? A large part of the explanation may lie in the way the two cases were portrayed in the media. While the public outcry in Britain was fuelled by sensational (and sensationalised) reporting of fraud involving fake receipts, duck houses and moat cleaning, media coverage in China focused much more on the diligent efforts of investigators, and on the commitment of China's top leadership to stamping out corruption in the Communist party. As detailed by [Chinese media scholars](#), the Chinese government's ability to control the media effectively allowed it to frame events in ways that increased the legitimacy of public institutions.

Of course, such heavy-handed tactics have little place in a liberal, free society, but our rejection of such practices should not obscure the larger lesson to be drawn from Chen's case – namely, that the control of corruption should not be treated as merely a judicial or technical exercise. Rather, efforts to impose accountability have important (and often negative) [effects on public opinion](#). Public officials who ignore these implications risk initiating anti-corruption efforts that may paradoxically breed greater popular cynicism, erode trust in public institutions, and increase the moral justifiability of the very behaviour they seek to deter.

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